Erasmus versus Luther : A Contemporary Analysis of the Debate on Free Will

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2020-09

Visala , A & Vainio , O-P 2020 , ' Erasmus versus Luther : A Contemporary Analysis of the Debate on Free Will ' , Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und þÿ R e l i g i o n s p h i l o s o p h i e . , v o l . 6 2 , n o . 3 , p p . 3 1 1 3 3 5 . h t t p s : / / d o i . o r g / 1

http://hdl.handle.net/10138/334438
https://doi.org/10.1515/nzsth-2020-0016

acceptedVersion

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Summary:

In this article, we will use contemporary analytic tools to make sense of the main arguments in the classic debate on free will between Erasmus of Rotterdam and the Reformer Martin Luther. Instead of offering another exegesis of these texts, we put forward an analysis that links this historical debate with contemporary discussions on free will and grace in philosophical theology. We argue that the debate was ultimately about how three theological core claims are related to one another: the Anti-Pelagian Constraint (humans are incapable of willing any good, in order to come to faith), the Responsibility Principle (humans are morally responsible in the eyes of God) and human free will. Erasmus attacks Luther by arguing that the Responsibility Principle cannot be maintained without free will, while Luther responds by arguing that Erasmus must reject free will, because it is in conflict with the Anti-Pelagian Constraint. Luther is then left with the dilemma of justifying the Responsibility Principle without free will – a task, which in our estimation, fails. In the concluding section of the article, we point out some continuities and discontinuities between the contemporary debate and that of Luther and Erasmus.

Zusammenfassung:

In diesem Artikel werden zeitgenössische analytische Werkzeuge verwendet, um die Hauptargumente in der klassischen Debatte zur Willensfreiheit zwischen Erasmus von Rotterdam und Martin Luther zu verstehen. Anstatt eine weitere Exegese dieser Texte vorzulegen, schlagen wir eine Analyse vor, die diese historische Debatte mit aktuellen Diskussionen zur Willensfreiheit und Gnade in der philosophischen Theologie verbindet. Wir behaupten, dass es in der Debatte letztendlich darum geht, wie drei theologische Kernansprüche miteinander zusammenhängen: Die anti-pelagianische Einschränkung (dass der Mensch nicht dazu fähig sei, selbst etwas Gutes zu wollen, um zum Glauben zu kommen), das Verantwortungsprinzip (dass der Mensch moralisch verantwortlich in den Augen Gottes sei) und die Existenz der menschlichen Willensfreiheit. Erasmus greift Luther an, indem er argumentiert, das Verantwortungsprinzip könne nicht ohne Willensfreiheit aufrechterhalten werden, während Luther erwidert, Erasmus müsse den freien Willen ablehnen, da er im Widerspruch zur anti-pelagianischen Einschränkung steht. Luther wird also die Herausforderung gestellt, das Verantwortungsprinzip ohne die Willensfreiheit zu rechtfertigen – eine Aufgabe, die nach unserer Einschätzung scheitern muss. Im abschließenden Teil des Artikels weisen wir auf einige Kontinuitäten und Diskontinuitäten zwischen der gegenwärtigen Debatte und der von Luther und Erasmus hin.

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1. Introduction

Much ink has been spilled over the famous showdown between the leading European humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam and the reformer Martin Luther concerning our freedom – or lack thereof – to have genuine faith in Christ. In 1524, Erasmus wrote his *De Libero Arbitrio Diatribe Sive Collatio* as a response to the *Assertio,* an earlier text by Luther. Luther then answered this in 1525 with his hefty *De Servo Arbitrio*.[1] We do not aim to provide yet another exegesis of Luther's and Erasmus' texts. Instead, our approach is unapologetically anachronistic: we will use contemporary analytic tools to make sense of the main arguments in the debate and seek to identify the exact points of disagreement.
Problems surrounding free will and moral responsibility have been extensively discussed in contemporary analytic philosophy. Fundamental conceptual issues have been identified and elucidated at a level of detail that was not available in the 16th century. We will examine the debate between Luther and Erasmus in the light of these conceptual resources. We suggest that such an approach is beneficial for understanding what happened between these two great European thinkers, and we hope to contribute both to historical studies of Luther and Erasmus and to contemporary debates about grace and free will in philosophical theology.
We will begin by briefly introducing what we take to be the core disagreement between Luther and Erasmus and briefly describe the basic conceptual tools we seek to apply to the material. We will then proceed to highlight some arguments that Erasmus puts forward in defence of free will and Luther's responses to these. Finally, we will highlight some fundamental problems in the positions of both Luther and Erasmus, concluding with some reflections on what the disagreement between these two debaters actually is.

Free Will, Moral Responsibility and Merit

The core issue in the debate between Luther and Erasmus was the role of free will in salvation. There are also minor disagreements about theological methods, the authority of the church and Church Fathers, but we will focus on this core issue of grace and free will.[2] Treading this familiar Augustinian territory, both Luther and Erasmus hold a strict Anti-Pelagian stance: in a significant respect, salvation is the work of God and grace is an

[1] Erasmus also wrote a response to Luther's volume, named *Hyperaspistes* (1527), but Erasmus' rebuttal of Luther's merciless attack was not much discussed. We will also leave it aside here.
[2] Excellent overviews of these issues are provided by, e.g., Andrea VESTRUCCI, *Theology as Freedom: On Martin Luther's De Servo Arbitrio* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019); Robert KOLB, *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method: From Martin Luther to the Formula of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017).

unmerited gift that God gives to the sinner. Kevin Timpe has usefully summarized what he calls the Anti-Pelagian Constraint for Christian accounts of free will and grace:

> *Anti-Pelagian Constraint* (APC): No fallen human individual is able to cause or will any good, including the will of her coming to saving faith, apart from unique grace.[3]

As will become apparent below, we take it that both Luther and Erasmus aim to adhere to this constraint: humans cannot save themselves by means of their own meritorious actions, nor is there anything that the sinner can do without God's help to move herself from the sinful state to that of godliness. However, there is significant disagreement between Luther and Erasmus as to the role of human will in the overall process of salvation. For Erasmus, some measure of undetermined or undecreed active human contribution is required in the process. After God's initial action towards the sinner, God works in cooperation of the individual's will in a way that cannot be preordained, predetermined or otherwise decreed by God. Without this active human contribution, in Erasmus' view it would make little sense for God to reward the saints and punish sinners. In contemporary terms, some measure of undetermined action from the human side is required for humans to be justifiably held morally responsible.
Against this, Luther flatly denies any kind of undetermined human contribution to the process of salvation. Despite this strong claim, Luther still holds onto human moral responsibility: it is perfectly righteous for God to punish and reward sinners and saints, even though sinners can do nothing to contribute to their salvation. The dispute is between these two theses:[4]

> *Luther*: God's unmerited grace is both necessary and sufficient for salvation. No act of will is needed where the agent has the ability to choose between undetermined or genuinely open, significant alternatives.

> *Erasmus*: God's unmerited grace is necessary but not sufficient for salvation. An act of will by the agent is needed, whereby the agent chooses between undetermined or genuinely open, significant alternatives.

Before we move on to examine Erasmus' and Luther's views in detail, we will briefly introduce the tools of our analysis. First, we must ask about the conditions of free will. The issue is complicated, because contemporary philosophers disagree as to what free will requires. Ordinarily, free will is defined as a feature of certain actions. There are actions that are done voluntarily or intentionally and then there are those that are not. Voluntary actions have a special quality to them: they are in some sense "up to us". This "up-to-usness" is what analyses of the conditions of free will try to grasp. In contemporary literature, we can identify three such analyses, each more demanding than the other:

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[3] Kevin TIMPE, *Free Will in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 13.
[4] Lynne Rudder BAKER, "Why Christians Should Not Be Libertarians: An Augustinian Challenge", in *Faith and Philosophy* 20 (4), 2003, 462. TIMPE (*Free Will*, 50–51) calls these views deterministic grace and non-deterministic grace respectively.

1. The agent acts rationally without external coercion or internal compulsion.
2. In addition to condition (1), the agent has access to metaphysically possible alternative courses of actions (e.g. to act or not to act).
3. In addition to condition (1), the agent is the source of the "springs of her actions", that is, those features that produce her actions, like her moral character, intentions and goals.

According to condition (1), free will only requires that one makes rational and deliberated decisions and is not under external coercion or internal compulsion or the subject of undue forces. There are a number of accounts of free will and moral responsibility in the current literature that follow this line of thought.[5] Some philosophers, however, maintain that free will also requires that the world exhibit certain indeterministic features without which the agent could not have access to metaphysically possible alternatives. The physical world and our brain must exhibit some indeterminism in order for our decisions to influence it. In contemporary literature, this condition is often formulated as follows:

> *The Principle of Alternative Possibilities* (PAP): an agent is morally responsible for a specific action only if the agent could have done otherwise.

There are various analyses of what the ability to do otherwise entails and whether it is compatible with the truth of determinism.[6] We will, however, put these debates aside here.

Finally, some philosophers defend a very strong version of free will, sometimes called *ultimate responsibility*. According to this view, the agent must be the source of her action in such a way that the action has its roots in features that are under her own control. In other words, the agent must have some measure of choice as to what her moral character is like and what her ultimate goals and intentions are. Robert Kane has argued that such control is possible only if the agent can make underdetermined moral choices or *character-shaping choices*, which have an impact on her moral character in the long run.[7] According to ultimate responsibility, then, a truly free agent not only controls her actions but also her character and moral disposition.

Armed with these three analyses of free will, we can now briefly look at the issue of compatibility, which plays a crucial role in the debate between Erasmus and Luther. Simply put, the question is about the compatibility of free will and divine (or theological) determinism. According to *divine determinism*, God's relationship to the created world is such that God determines, decrees or otherwise controls all events, including the free actions of individual humans.[8] In terms that Luther and Erasmus themselves use, divine determinism entails that whatever happens, including all human actions, happens by necessity. So, if God

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[5] See, e.g., John Martin FISCHER and Mark RAVIZZA, *Responsibility and Control: A Theory of Moral Responsibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
[6] See, e.g., Peter van INWAGEN, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).
[7] Robert KANE, *The Significance of Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).
[8] Peter FURLONG, *The Challenges of Divine Determinism: A Philosophical Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 14–18.

wants an agent's action A to occur, it follows that the agent's action occurs necessarily. Similarly, we can define a *deterministic account of grace* such that God ultimately determines, decrees or otherwise controls all states and actions contributing to salvation.
There is considerable debate as to whether free will is compatible with divine (or any other kind) of determinism. The *compatibilist*, or defender of the compatibility thesis, argues that determinism and free will are in fact compatible with one another. One popular strategy to defend this position is to argue for free will along the lines of free will condition (1) and demonstrate how an agent can act reasonably and without coercion even if determinism were true. Against this, the *incompatibilist* maintains that free will and determinism are not compatible: if determinism were true, no human agent could have free will. The incompatibilist often argues that free will requires either one or both free will conditions (2) and (3), but these conditions are incompatible with determinism. If determinism were true, we could not make choices between alternative possibilities or we could not be the sources of our actions in the way required by condition (3).
As we will soon demonstrate in detail, both Luther and Erasmus assume the incompatibilist position. Erasmus' rejection of Luther's view is grounded in the assumption that necessity is incompatible with free will. If human acts are results of prior decrees of God, they are necessary and humans cannot be free or morally responsible. Similarly, Luther rejects free will on the grounds of thoroughgoing divine determinism. Since God is in complete providential control and knows the future, nothing can escape divine necessity.
Now that we have a preliminary grasp of the idea of free will, it is time to look at *moral responsibility*. Moral responsibility is crucial for the debate between Erasmus and Luther. Erasmus invokes it in his defence of free will and Luther maintains that we can be morally responsible even without having free will. As we will see shortly in more detail, Erasmus holds onto the claim that free will is a necessary condition for moral responsibility. If an action of an agent is not "up to her" in some sense, the agent cannot be held morally responsible for that action. God's punishing of sinners and rewarding of saints is just and right, so both sinners and saints must be morally responsible for their actions. This is simply what moral responsibility is. Because God can justifiably punish sinners and reward saints, there must be free will. Against this, Luther strongly rejects free will as a necessary condition for moral responsibility. As created agents, humans have no free will, but they are nevertheless responsible for their actions, good or evil. God is righteous in punishing sinners and rewarding saints, even though the actions that contribute to salvation or damnation are actually not in any sense up to them.
Holding someone morally responsible means according to that person a moral status on the basis of her actions and attitudes.[9] Contemporary philosophers often describe the giving and upholding of moral statuses in terms of *reactive attitudes*, such as praise, blame, esteem and hate. These come with various practices, like punishment and forgiveness. When an agent's action fills the standards of moral expectation, that agent is a proper recipient of positive

[9] For an overview of the contemporary discussion, see Matthew TALBERT, *Moral Responsibility* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

reactive attitudes, like praise or esteem. Similarly, when an agent's action does not fulfil the relevant expectations or criteria, that agent becomes the apt subject of blame or punishment.[10] Moral responsibility is often grounded in a very specific relationship between an agent's action and a moral appraisal of the agent. Contemporary philosophers use the notion of *basic desert* in this context – a concept that had not been spelled out in the 16th century. This notion means that the connection between a moral action and the corresponding reactive attitude (praiseworthiness, for instance) is *basic*. It is basic in the sense that it is not derivative of some other purpose or goal. A person simply *deserves* positive reactive attitudes if she acts well and negative attitudes if she acts badly. In other words, a negative moral status should be attributed to evildoers and a positive one to those who do good. A person who does a good deed should be praised or valued or esteemed for it, whereas a person who acts evilly ought to be blamed for it. This should be done not because of some ulterior motive, like praising someone because praise will make the person act better in the future, but because the agent *deserves* such treatment.

The concept of merit has a central role in the debate between Erasmus and Luther. Merit has a long and complicated theological history, which we will put aside for the moment.[11] The term seldom features in contemporary analyses of moral responsibility. Nevertheless, we suggest that it can be analysed in terms of the aforementioned basic desert. Meritorious actions are those actions that ought to positively shape an agent's moral status. If, for instance, an agent commits a loving and charitable act, that act, given Christian moral standards, counts as a good act and is thus meritorious. The agent should be valued, esteemed and thanked, as far as that action is concerned, by others. Given what she has done, the agent is "owed" these positive reactive attitudes from others. She is deserving of these attitudes simply because she has done a good action. Conversely, if an agent commits a bad or wrong action, she is deserving of negative reactive attitudes simply by virtue of committing such an action.

Given this analysis, Luther and Erasmus disagree as to the grounds on which God adopts positive (love and rewards) or negative (punishment, anger) reactive attitudes towards humans. Erasmus maintains that good actions incur merit in the eyes of God and that humans can contribute to their sinfulness or faithfulness in meritorious ways. God would be unjust to disregard these merits. So, humans deserve certain treatment from God because of their moral actions; God "owes" it to humans to treat them in a certain way. Against this, Luther maintains that God "owes" humans nothing. While Luther sometimes maintains that God treats humans on the basis of their actions, he also suggests that merit plays little or no part in this. Whatever humans do, they do not incur merit in God's eyes. Luther reasons that if humans could act in such a way as to incur merit from God, they could, in principle, save themselves, but the Scripture teaches that they cannot. So, no action can be meritorious in the eyes of God. We will soon see how this plays out.

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[10] See Michael MCKENNA and Paul RUSSELL (ed.), *Free Will and Reactive Attitudes: Perspectives on P. F. Strawson's "Freedom and Resentment"* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

[11] For a comparison of Lutheran and Catholic views, see Olli-Pekka VAINIO, "Faith, Merit and Eternal Life", in *Dialog* 56 (2017), 84–90.

Erasmus: Free Will Is Necessary for Moral Responsibility

We will now move on to examine Erasmus' arguments for preserving a role for free will in salvation. Recall Erasmus' main claim that God's unmerited grace is necessary but not sufficient for salvation. An act of will by the agent is needed whereby the agent chooses between undetermined or genuinely open, significant alternatives. In defence of this claim, Erasmus offers a number of arguments.[12] Underlying most of these is a principle that he takes for granted. We call this the *Responsibility Principle* (RP):

> *RP*: A person is morally responsible (can be blamed, punished, rewarded) for her actions in the eyes of God. This includes sinners' actions, which should be punished, and saints' actions, which should be rewarded.

Luther also accepts this principle and affirms that God does nothing wrong in punishing sinners and rewarding saints. Their disagreement is ultimately about what this principle requires. For Erasmus, the truth of RP requires the existence of free will. Otherwise, RP cannot be true, because its truth and the falsity of free will would imply that God is unjust in rewarding and punishing humans. Against this, Luther argues that RP can be true without free will being true.

Erasmus' main argument against Luther is that Luther cannot hold onto RP and reject free will. Without free will, there can be no just punishment or reward. Second, Erasmus worries that Luther's attack on free will might come dangerously close to Manicheanism, depicting in too negative terms the human ability to act morally.[13] Third, Erasmus worries about the moral and political consequences of teaching bondage of the will. If people were to learn that they could not do otherwise, there would be no incentive to try to live a moral life.[14] In what

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[12] The English translation of Erasmus' *On the Freedom of the Will: A Diatribe or Discourse by Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam* that we use here is from the following work: *Luther and Erasmus. Free Will and Salvation*, trans. E. Gordon RUPP (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1969).

[13] Erasmus 43: "From the time of the apostles down to the present day, no writer has yet emerged who has totally taken away the power of freedom of choice, save only Manichaeus and John Wyclif. For the authority of Laurentius Valla, who comes nearest to agreement with them, has not much weight among theologians. The doctrine of Manichaeus, indeed, though it has long been exploded and repudiated by common consent of the whole world, yet I am inclined to think less useless to piety than that of Wyclif. For Manichaeus ascribes good and bad works to two natures in man in such a way that we owe good works to God in consequence of our condition, and yet against the power of darkness he leaves cause for imploring the aid of the Creator, that with this aid we may sin more lightly, and more easily do good works. Wyclif, however, ascribes all things to sheer necessity, and what room does he leave either for our prayers or for our endeavors?"

[14] Erasmus 41: "Again, suppose for a moment that it were true in a certain sense, as Augustine says somewhere, that 'God works in us good and evil, and rewards his own good works in us, and punishes his evil works in us'; what a window to impiety would the public avowal of such an opinion open to countless mortals! Especially in view of the slowness of mind of mortal men, their sloth, their malice, and their incurable propensity toward all manner of evil. What weakling will be able to bear the endless and wearisome warfare against his flesh? What evildoer will take pains to correct his life? Who will be able to bring himself to love God with all his heart when He created hell seething with eternal torments in order to punish his own misdeeds in his victims as though he took delight in human torments? For that is how most people will interpret them. For the most part, men are by nature dull-witted and sensual, prone to unbelief, inclined to evil, with a bent to blasphemy, so that there is no need to add fuel to the furnace."

follows, we will mostly focus on the first argument and comment on the second and third arguments only in passing.

The first step in Erasmus' argument is to give support for RP. He points out that the Scriptures, Fathers and the Church all hold that people are responsible for their actions in the eyes of God. Scriptures contain enormous amounts of commandments, exhortations and pleadings. As God justifiably blames or praises humans failing or succeeding to follow His commands, fulfilling – or at least trying to fulfil – God's commandments must be, in some sense, up to us.[15] Now, Erasmus takes it for granted that God's commandments create duties for us. In this way, God thereby implies that there is something that we can do to fulfil those duties. Here Erasmus applies what has later becomes known as the "ought implies can principle".[16] Since God righteously demands that humans live up to certain moral standards, living up to those standards must in some way be up to humans, or at least humans can somehow contribute towards living up to them (like willingly accepting God's help, for instance).

Erasmus defines free will as follows: "By free choice in this place we mean a power of the human will by which a man can apply himself to the things which lead to eternal salvation, or turn away from them."[17] As Luther subsequently points out, this definition is rather loose. However, Erasmus makes his point more clear in explanations following the definition. First, Erasmus takes free will as composed of two abilities: the ability to act in pursuit of the good (will) and the ability to discern between what is good and evil (reason). Before the Fall, Adam's ability to act was not hindered by anything; if he had wanted to, Adam could have turned towards the good or evil. Similarly, Adam's reason was uncorrupted, which meant that he could clearly discern the good. After the Fall, however, Adam's ability to commit morally good actions was impaired in two ways: his ability to discern the good with his reason dimmed (but did not vanish) and his ability to make morally significant choices between good and evil was lost.

Erasmus' Augustinianism is quite apparent here. The human will has, in principle, the ability to make morally significant choices but that ability is greatly impaired by sin. God's special grace is required in order to remove this impairment, after which human will can indeed participate in and exercise its power to the fullest even while the tendency towards evil remains. Moreover, Erasmus does not consider human reason to be corrupted to such an extent that humans would be unable to discern significant moral truths. Revelation provides moral teaching and offers commandments that help the somewhat dimmed reason to discern God's will. Even pagan philosophers, Erasmus maintains, have access to basic moral truths and they are able to discern the existence of God. In this, they have some measure of reason as well as the ability to act virtuously, but neither makes them deserving of salvation.[18]

Given the above, it is clear that Erasmus strongly rejects Pelagianism. He does not claim that humans can put themselves in a position by way of moral actions where they would deserve

[15] See, e.g., Erasmus 64–74.

[16] For an illuminating discussion of this principle, see Jesse COUENHOVEN, "The Indicative in the Imperative: On Augustinian Oughts and Cans", in Hugh MCCANN (ed.), *Free Will and Classical Theism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 71–92.

[17] Erasmus 47.

[18] Erasmus 49.

or merit God's grace. God grace is a gift, which is based on Christ's redeeming work independently of any contribution from the human side. However, Erasmus does maintain that God's gift of grace does not reach its final end, the salvation of an individual, without a contribution by the human individual and her will. Furthermore, the choices and decisions made by the human will after it has been freed by grace are such that they are not ultimately determined, made necessary or decreed by God's will prior to them. It follows from this that humans can make undetermined choices that lead away from God and finally to damnation, or that humans can make choices that, with God's help, lead to goodness and salvation. So, Erasmus very much looks like an incompatibilist. If God were to make all human acts and choices necessary, humans could neither act freely nor be responsible for their actions.

In terms of the analysis of free will above, we can put Erasmus' view in the following form. In the state before the Fall, humans had free will in the sense of strong, ultimate responsibility (3). After the Fall, sin has impaired the ability to shape one's character, inclining it towards either good or evil. At this point, free will (2) and (3) are impaired but not lost, in the sense that these abilities potentially exist in will and reason. When God's grace again shapes human will and reason, the ability to do otherwise (2) and the ability to shape one's moral character (3) begin to operate fully again.

Finally, Erasmus reaffirms his commitment to APC: the contribution of the human will to the process of salvation does not mean that the person thereby can be taken to deserve or merit salvation. However morally good the human agent is, she cannot avoid acting sinfully at some point. Also, the agent cannot generate faith in God all by herself. Although the agent does not merit salvation or generate faith, the agent does participate in these voluntarily in such a way that cannot be predetermined by God's prior will. In this sense, moral actions and faith are up to human agents, while they have their ultimate source in God.[19]

Now we come to the link between moral responsibility and free will. Those who accept RP should also accept free will, Erasmus claims. First, Erasmus appeals to considerations on moral knowledge. If a person is, without any fault of her own, ignorant about moral facts relevant to a specific action (what is right, for instance), that person cannot be held responsible for her act. It follows from this principle that if human reason were completely corrupt and did not have access to moral truths (as Luther seems to maintain), humans could not be held responsible for sinning. However, as they are held responsible by God for sinning, at least some dim knowledge of God's will and moral truths must be left.[20]

Erasmus also advances an argument that a person cannot be held morally responsible for an action if that agent had no choice or some other kind of undetermined control over that action.[21] If sinners and saints had no control whatsoever over their morally significant actions, it would be irrational and unjust for God to punish or reward them. So, humans must have free will at least in sense (1). Furthermore, if RP were true and humans had no free will, the blame for sin, evil actions and even eternal damnation would rest on God's shoulders. In

[19] Erasmus 50. Erasmus' solution resembles the account of free will recently put forward by Kevin TIMPE and Eleonore STUMP, which is inspired by Thomas Aquinas. See Kevin TIMPE, "Grace and Controlling What We Do Not Cause", in *Faith and Philosophy* 24(3), 2007. While they are clearly compatible, Erasmus himself does not explicitly embrace this position. It is vehemently denied by Luther in WA18, 750, 5–10.

[20] Erasmus 50.

[21] Erasmus 51.

other words, if one were to assume (as Luther does) complete divine determinism, including human actions, then the responsibility for evil lies with the divine determiner, not the determined. Similar reasoning can be applied to the eternal destiny of humans. Eternal punishment and eternal bliss are ultimate forms of moral responsibility, punishment and reward. If a person had no control whatsoever over her moral character and faith, which are the grounds on which judgment will be pronounced, it would be unjust to judge them. For these reasons, Erasmus strongly criticises Luther for rejecting the notion of merit and free will completely. Without them, God begins to look like a tyrant, who judges people arbitrarily.

Erasmus walks a tight line. On the one hand, he wants to hold onto the link between free will and moral responsibility. On the other hand, he has troubles with his commitment to APC: Erasmus does not explicate how exactly the contribution of undetermined human will works in different parts of the process of salvation. These two motives, APC and RP with free will, pull Erasmus in opposite directions. As far as we can see, he is not able to present a view in which these two are coherently integrated. It is precisely this point that Luther vehemently presses: either Erasmus has to reject APC and accept that unaided human will and reason can act such that a person can merit salvation, or he has to agree with Luther in denying free will altogether.

Luther: Gospel versus Free Will

Luther's reaction to Erasmus was strong and harsh.[22] As far as Luther was concerned, Erasmus went directly to the heart of the matter, the human inability to please God and God's undeserved gift, the Gospel. Recall Luther's position outlined above: God's unmerited grace is both necessary and sufficient for salvation. Not only does Luther hold that free will is useless for grace, but he also argues that human free will is incompatible with the Christian view of God, sin, grace and salvation. Luther accepts RP, but attempts to justify it on different grounds than Erasmus. Erasmus argues that because RP is true, humans must have free will. Luther responds by severing responsibility from free will completely: RP is justified without human free will. Indeed, if someone (like Erasmus) holds that humans have free will, this commits them to a doctrine of grace that is unbiblical and anti-evangelical. The Gospel and the doctrine of human free will are incompatible, so Luther's argument goes.

Before we begin, we should make a general remark about the differences between Luther's and Erasmus' styles of writing and overall aims. For the lack of a better word, Erasmus' interest is holistic and philosophical; he wants to understand the general framework of the economy of salvation and Christian life. His ideal approach is a somewhat detached, cool and intellectual inquiry. Luther, on the other hand, opposes this and approaches the topic from a more existential and spiritual viewpoint. He is only interested in one single thing: whether our salvation is up to us, and his answer is a resounding NO![23] Regardless of his scathing

[22] In referring to *De Servo Arbitrio*, we use here the German *Weimarer Ausgabe* (WA18) and for English translations the recent abbreviated American Edition of *On the Bondage of the Will* (BW). (AE: LUTHER, Martin, The Bondage of the Will, 1525 in *The Annotated Luther* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016.))

[23] Here a Lutheran theologian probably would point out that Luther does this for pastoral reasons, as absolute necessity is the only sure basis for trusting God's promises. But does this help us to fathom whether we are

remarks on human wisdom and philosophy in general (and on Erasmus' intellectualism in particular), Luther is forced to rely on a number of philosophical arguments in BW. This is why we should not read BW simply as a work of mystical or pastoral theology.
In the end of BW, Luther summarizes his arguments against free will.[24] First he argues, "God foreknows and predestines all things, that God can neither be mistaken in divine foreknowledge nor hindered in God's predestination, and that nothing takes place but as God wills it." This is the most powerful and oft-repeated argument in BW. Second, Satan holds people captive and under his will, which we cannot resist unless Christ redeems us. Third, humans are fallen and under the influence of original sin, which makes it impossible for them to turn towards the good. Luther refers here to the weak performance of the regenerate to do good as an argument for the total impossibility of freedom in the unregenerate. Fourth, Luther refers to the economy of salvation for the Jews and Gentiles. While Jews did not benefit at all from the Law, righteousness was given freely and without the works of the Law to the Gentiles. Therefore, observance of the Law is futile. Fifth, the atonement proves that the whole of humanity, and not only some parts of humanity or individual human beings, were fallen, and the whole humanity is similarly redeemed by the work of Christ.

Let us now take a closer look at some of these arguments. As noted, the most powerful argument that Luther presents arises from the nature of God understood in the sense of classical theism. God is an all-knowing sovereign outside of time. Therefore, God knows all future states of affairs and cannot be wrong about them. If God knows the future, the future cannot be contingent, but it has to be necessary. So, everything that occurs, including human actions, must follow absolute necessity.[25] Luther goes on to claim that this doctrine is "the only and the best consolation" for terrified Christians because God cannot lie and change His will, and His will cannot be resisted.[26] Luther also thinks that denying his doctrine is tantamount to blasphemy and will result in eternal damnation, to which Erasmus will be subjected.[27] Luther openly states this is an extreme view, a true theological nuclear option.[28] Luther's main point can be expressed in terms of the three accounts of free will presented above. According to Luther, humans have never had and never will have free will of types (2) and (3). Because of God's foreknowledge and predestination, humans cannot make choices between morally significant alternatives. This rules out PAP as a criterion for moral responsibility. Furthermore, Luther strongly rejects the idea that human beings could have

among the elect? The elect will be elected and the damned will be damned, but because God's will is inscrutable and immutable, I can never know to which group I belong and there is nothing I can ever do to change my membership status. This sounds like a bad pastoral principle to us.

[24] WA18, 786–787. AE 255–256.

[25] WA 18, 615, 12–18. AE 170: "Here, then, is something fundamentally necessary and salutary for a Christian, to know that God foreknows nothing contingently, but that God foresees and purposes and does all things by God's own immutable, eternal, and infallible will. Here is a thunderbolt by which free choice is completely prostrated and shattered, so that those who want free choice asserted must either deny or explain away this thunderbolt, or get rid of it by some other means."

[26] WA18, 619, 16–21.

[27] WA18, 632, 27–633, 6.

[28] WA18, 755, 35–37.

control over the sources of their actions.[29] "The direction of will", that is to say, purposes and goals emerging from one's character, are fixed by either God or Satan. Without God's influence, humans are destined to want evil and act accordingly.

Luther aims at demolishing the arguments that Erasmus puts forward for the conjunction of RP and free will. For Luther, RP is most certainly true but free will is not. He maintains that one cannot infer from the mere existence of a commandment or a duty, to the conclusion that it is possible to fulfil the demand of the commandment or a duty. While Scripture indeed teaches RP, it does not thereby imply that it is possible for humans to fulfil God's commandments. God's commandments, exhortations and attempts at persuasion do not entail that one can, if one wants to, act according to them. Luther maintains that God has revealed His demands on us precisely to demonstrate to that we *cannot* fulfil them and instil a feeling of despair over our sinfulness and terror over God's righteous judgment.

By revealing His will, God wants us to realize that we cannot, by ourselves, act according to it.[30] To use the language of modern speech act theory, Luther insists that commandments should be interpreted as a kind of perlocution aimed not at creating the action described by the locution in the listener but a specific response, namely, terror and despair.

One of Luther's most interesting contributions to the debate on free will and grace is his *reductio ad absurdum* argument, which keeps repeating in BW. This is where Luther puts the Gospel of God's grace in opposition to human free will. One has to accept one and reject the other. The argument goes as follows. First, according to Luther, free will requires the ability to do otherwise and shape one's moral character. Like Erasmus, Luther is an incompatibilist in terms of divine determinism and free will. But if humans actually had the ability to do otherwise and shape their moral character, it would follow that humans could, at least in principle, act in such a way as to merit salvation. In other words, if humans had free will, it would in principle be possible to live a sinless life. However, this cannot be true, since Scripture teaches unequivocally that salvation cannot be merited.[31] So, humans do not have free will.[32]

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[29] Earlier Luther had argued for bondage of the will by relying on a psychological theory of human judgment and will. In an early disputation against scholastic theology, Luther had resisted Duns Scotus and Gabriel Biel, for example. See Leif GRANE, *Contra Gabrielem: Luthers Auseinandersetzung mit Gabriel Biel in der disputatio contra scholasticam theologicam 1517* (Kobenhavn: Gyldendahl, 1962). This same framework is applied in Philip Melanchthon's *Loci Communes* 1521, where the bondage of the will is argued with the help of affects. Human choice is structured by affects, so that we always obey the strongest one. Therefore, we always obey our affects and not the judgments of our reason. See Risto SAARINEN, *Weakness of the Will in Reformation and Renaissance Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). In BW, Luther acknowledges and employs this dire condition against the freedom of will. AE 180: "That is to say, when human beings are without the Spirit of God, they do not do evil against their own will, as if they were taken by the scruff of the neck and forced to it, like a thief or robber carried off against their own will to punishment, but they do it of their own accord and with a ready will. And this readiness or will to act they cannot by their own powers omit, restrain, or change, but they keep on willing and being ready; and even if the human beings are compelled by external force to do something different, yet the will within them remains averse and they resent whatever compels or resists it."

[30] WA18, 673, 39–43; 675, 20–24.

[31] WA18, 664, 1–15; 686, 36–687, 4.

[32] Luther does not make this argument explicit and does not really defend its core premise at length. Why would it follow from the fact that humans have the ability to make undetermined, morally significant choices that they would be able to live a sinless life? This is crucial for Luther's claim but he does very little to defend it. However, some contemporary philosophers have indeed put forward arguments in support of this. See

Now, Luther has affirmed RP and APC and rejected free will conditions (2) and (3) on the basis of their incompatibility with divine determinism. His problem now is justifying RP. How can humans be morally responsible for their actions in the eyes of God, if their actions are not up to them? Luther could endorse free will condition (1) and defend the compatibility of moral responsibility and divine determinism on that basis. In contemporary debates, this is exactly what many Reformed theologians and philosophers do. According to them, free will requires that humans are able to make rational decisions free of external and internal compulsion. Human could have this kind of free will even if divine determinism were true. This would, in turn, guarantee moral responsibility.[33] Luther, however, does not take this route and decides to reject the notion of free will wholesale. Free choices require indeterminism but there is no such thing in God's world. Therefore, there is no free will. Luther now faces the task of making sense of RP without free will. In other words, Luther has to explain how God can be just while holding humans morally responsible for actions that were not really up to them. Furthermore, he must show why God is not responsible for human evil, if it is not really up to humans to overcome evil. Luther has to account for human responsibility for evil without invoking free will, while holding onto the claim that God decrees evil human actions, knows about them and is deeply involved in their production. There are several places in BW where Luther takes on this task.

Consider Luther's sketch-like discussion of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart.[34] First, Luther restates his unwavering commitment to God's omnipotence and omnicausality as well as God's goodness. God cannot do evil. However, God indeed causes both good and evil in the godly and the ungodly. Even Satan's evil will and actions are directly moved by God. Here Luther is clearly rejecting the language of willing and permitting, which is often used in this context. Instead of saying that God affects the good and only permits evil, he maintains that God indeed affects both good and evil. However, God is not to be held responsible for evil actions or the sinful character of the ungodly, because God only moves their wills to action "according to their natures". In other words, if the individual's nature is evil, God moves that nature to evil acts. The fault and blame are with the individual, not with God.

Luther defends this claim by way of analogies. If a rider rides a three-legged horse, we do not blame the rider for its uneven stride. Similarly, a carpenter is not held responsible for the bad effect if his axe is defective. According to these analogies, the fault is in the tool, not the handler.[35] Later on, Luther explains these by saying that God does not create the evil nature (and will, presumably) in humans like an evil bartender pouring poison into a chalice that is otherwise good.[36] It is humanity which is responsible for the wickedness and evil in people's natures and wills, and God simply moves people's wills to actions that humans already want to commit anyway. Moreover, Luther provides an additional argument: since God is by definition omnipotent and causes everything in creation, He cannot withdraw that omnipotent

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Guillaume BIGNON, *Excusing Sinners and Blaming God: A Calvinist Assessment of Determinism, Moral Responsibility, Divine Involvement in Evil* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2018).

[33] See, e.g., BIGNON, *Excusing Sinners*; Paul HELM, *The Providence of God* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

[34] WA18, 709, 10–713, 25.

[35] WA18, 709, 22–29.

[36] WA18, 710, 31–711, 9.

power of conserving and moving without becoming not-God. Luther's argument is difficult to follow here. It seems to suggest that God cannot be held responsible for deciding to cease to be God, which is impossible anyway. So, God has no other choice than to keep moving evil people to evil actions.[37]

At one point, Luther seems backslide into acknowledging that humans indeed have free will (in some sense) after all in secular, non-religious affairs, but not with respect to God and grace. In order to do this, Luther distinguishes things that are "below us" and things that are "above us".[38] He argues that we have freedom regarding things that belong to the order of nature (*esse naturae*), but not regarding things that belong to the order of grace (*esse gratiae*).[39] This distinction aims to preserve some measure of free will and human agency in everyday affairs. Luther acknowledges the significance of human agency when he claims that "heaven was not made for geese".[40]

What Luther fails to notice is that the above-below distinction contradicts his other commitments.[41] As we already saw, Luther repeats over and over again his commitment to divine determinism. When explaining the notion, he makes no reference to divine determinism applying only to "matters above" humans. Instead, it is presented as a universal thesis about the ultimate nature of our world. God's will and knowledge are absolute and unchanging and they cover all events, including all human actions. Given that all human actions, not just God-directed actions, happen out of prior necessity, it is difficult to see how "matters below" humans could be any more free than those "above" them. Even in everyday affairs, divine determinism makes sure that humans have neither the ability to do otherwise nor the ability to shape their moral character. God's will and knowledge determine my act to pick up a glass from the table in exactly the same way as they determine my act of voluntary lying (sin).

Perhaps we could interpret Luther's concession as charitably as possible. Luther's views could be made consistent as by positing two views of free will. "Free will proper" would be free will along the lines of conditions (2) and (3). Luther maintains that no human has such free will. However, given the above-below distinction, Luther might be implying that in everyday affairs humans have a form of free will that is compatible with determinism after all. This would be free will (1), something that does not, in Luther's eyes, really deserve the title "free will". People are capable of making rational and uncoerced choices in their

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[37] WA18, 708, 19–709, 10.

[38] WA18, 638, 4–11. AE 184: "...free choice is allowed to them only with respect to what is beneath them and not what is above them. That is to say, human beings should know that with regard to their faculties and possessions they have the right to use, to do, or to leave undone, according to their own free choice, though even this is controlled by the free choice of God alone, who acts in whatever way God pleases." WA18, 672, 7–29. AE 204: "the human beings are divided between two kingdoms, in one of which they are directed by their own choice and counsel, apart from any precepts and commandments of God, namely, in their dealings with the lower creatures. Here human beings reign and are the lord, as having been left in the hand of their own counsel. Not that God so leaves the human beings as not to cooperate with them in everything, but God has granted them the free use of things according to their own choice, and has not restricted them by any laws or injunctions."

[39] WA18, 752, 1–19.

[40] WA18, 636, 20–22. AE 182.

[41] The annotation in AE 204 claims, "The following shows Luther's attempt to avoid pure and total determinism." However, even Luther himself seems to recognize that this cannot be avoided. See the previous note.

everyday lives and they can be held responsible for them. However, this does not apply to the "things above"; with respect to God, not even rational choices are possible.

Sola Fide and Merit

Luther is clearly worried about the possible consequences that rejecting free will might have for God's ultimate judgment and eternal punishment. Erasmus maintains that God would be unjust to punish sinners and reward the saints, if their actions were not really up to them at all. If humans had no free will and had no control over whether their will is aligned towards the good, it would be unjust of God to bless or punish them. In the worst case, humans would escape blame and the responsibility of the evil fall from God. So, the conjunction of RP and incompatibilist free will is there to keep the blame from slipping from humans to God. What we have here, in fact, is one version of the problem of evil. How can God be good, even when He decrees human evils to happen and then judges them and punishes the individuals? Does the responsibility of human evil reside with God? Luther goes to great lengths to answer this problem.

Consider Luther's discussion on merit. In general, Luther's aim is to undermine Erasmus' argument for linking free will and RP. On the one hand, Luther maintains that people are ultimately judged as unrighteous or righteous on the basis of their actions. However, this judgment is not based on merit or, in contemporary terms, their deserts. In other words, God does not judge people on the basis of what they *deserve*. Instead, punishments and rewards are *consequences* of evil and good actions, respectively. But consequence does not entail deserts.[42]

It is not particularly clear what Luther is after in distinguishing deserts from consequences, especially when he does not really explain what he means by punishment being the consequence of evil. It is easier to see why Luther thinks that humans cannot be "owed" any kind of treatment from God. This is because human actions committed in the fallen state are not meritorious in the eyes of God. Luther explains that humans are punished for evil actions and rewarded for good actions. But this does not imply that the sources of those actions are under human control. Human actions are brought about by human will and reason; in this sense, human will and reason are "active" in producing actions. However, individuals do not control their reasons and will at all. Instead, they are controlled by either Satan or God, respectively. It is not as if Satan or God completely bypass the process of human action production (reason and will), but they determine whether that production mechanism is geared towards evil or good.

Later in BW, Luther takes up this topic again. This time, Luther's discussion appears in a context where he presents yet another *reductio* of Erasmus's argument. Luther argues that if one takes God as righteous when He saves people without merit (APC), then one should also take God as righteous when He punishes those who are innocent. But because this is absurd, one should conclude that God's ultimate judgment has nothing to do with merit at all. Indeed, he maintains that taking into account any merit would be beneath God altogether, because

[42] WA18, 693, 37–694, 29.

this would contradict God's omnipotence and power to do anything God wanted.[43] By definition, God is the being who rules over everything and makes decisions that are not grounded on prior reasons or justice. God's decisions define what justice is, not the other way around. In dealing with humans, God has neither an obligation nor reason to take into account any merit. In God's eyes, because He is omnipotent and perfectly free, humans deserve nothing and God "owes" them nothing, no matter how they act.

What is effectively being argued in this passage by Luther is that God's responsibility attitudes towards humans (punishment, blessing, etc.) have no antecedent reason prior to God's decision, nor do they have any grounding in what people are like, what they do, what they deserve, and how moral or immoral their actions are. If this is the case, then God does not in any circumstances deliver ultimate judgment on the basis of what the individual deserves. If the opposite were the case, God would be constrained or limited by how people actually behaved. Since God's choices are not to be restricted by such considerations, He can, if He so decides, damn whomever He pleases and bless whomever He pleases.[44]

The guiding motivation behind this theory is Luther's maxim of *sola fide*. When an agent has faith, God counts this agent to be righteous, not because the agent deserves it but because of Christ's redeeming work. A sinner who does not deserve to be treated righteously is treated righteously, because of her faith in Christ. All of Luther's animosity towards merit and free will has its roots in this basic conviction. For him, the whole project of the Reformation and the doctrine of justification by faith are in contradiction with free will. If humans had free will, they could act in such a way as to deserve favourable treatment from God, but this would mean that the work of Christ and faith would be in vain. If Christ's work is to have significance, humans should be utterly incapable of incurring any kind of merit in God's eyes, deserving nothing good from Him. So, every aspect of free will must be eradicated in order for God's mercy to be a gift.

Luther's Ultimate Dilemma

The fact that Luther rejects free will and affirms Anti-Pelagianism and RP produces a problem of evil, which, in our estimation, he is unable to solve. Consider the following three claims:

1. God is perfectly loving and wills the salvation of everyone.
2. God is not constrained by merit or deserts in whom He counts as righteous and unrighteous. So, God could, if He so wanted, count everyone righteous or organize things such that everyone would come to faith and be saved (because there is no human free will).
3. Not everyone is saved.

It is difficult to see how these claims could be consistently held. A plausible argument can be made on the basis of claims (1) and (2) against (3). If (1) and (2) are true, God has the will

[43] WA18, 730, 1–721, 14.
[44] WA18, 772, 1–36.

and the means to save everyone, which would lead to the falsity of (3). Conversely, a plausible argument can be made from (2) and (3) against (1). If (2) and (3) are true, God does not love everyone equally and does not will the salvation of all. A significant tension arises: either God does not will the salvation of everyone or everyone will be saved eventually. In contemporary debates, Kevin Timpe has suggested that this is the dilemma that all deterministic accounts of grace will have to face.

Erasmus attempts to solve the dilemma by positing free will, namely, rejecting (2). Only positing incompatibilist free will explains the truth of (1) and (3). God cannot decree, determine or in some other way make an individual's salvation necessary. Salvation requires, as a necessary condition, an act of the individual's will that is not made necessary by God. As a consequence, God cannot, even if He wanted to, guarantee the salvation of everyone.

Luther, of course, accepts none of this, because it follows from this that salvation would be, at least to some extent, up to the human individual. So, Luther must affirm (2). He also takes (3) as a clearly revealed truth. His only option, therefore, is to adjust (1) in some way. He makes a distinction between *two wills* of God. Following his interpretation of St Paul, Luther draws a distinction between God's revealed will (salvation for all) and God's secret will (salvation for some and damnation for others) and warns us to speculate about the latter. These two wills can be seen very dramatically when Luther writes:

> It is likewise the part of this incarnate God to weep, wail, and groan over the perdition of the ungodly, when the will of the Divine Majesty purposely abandons and reprobates some to perish. And it is not for us to ask why he does so, but to stand in awe of God who both can do and wills to do such things.[45]

Christ represents God's universal charity, and this is what is revealed to humans. However, in His majesty, God might have another, incomprehensible will, which decrees the salvation of some and leaves others to damnation. It is this will which humans cannot understand, and they should avoid speculating about it.[46]

Luther's solution can be interpreted in two ways here. Some of Luther's comments suggest that God does indeed have reasons for electing some and leaving others out. To some extent this follows responses that have been recently developed in the context of the problem of evil. The *sceptical theist* response maintains that God might, as far as we know, have good reasons to allow the evil we see. We humans, however, are not in the proper epistemic position to know those reasons, and they might not even be comprehensible to us. Similarly, Luther suggests that we should take God as wanting the good of all and loving all human beings, while believing that some will be damned. God might, as far as we know, have good reasons for acting this way, but we cannot comprehend those reasons.

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[45] WA18, 689, 32–690, 2. AE 216.

[46] Incidentally, we see nothing in BW on which to base the distinction between single predestination and double predestination, as some interpreters of Luther have suggested. As far as we can tell, Luther does not make such a distinction and indeed thinks that the ultimate fate of both the saved and the damned depends only on God's eternal decree. WA18, 689, 32–690, 2; 706, 12–21; 716, 1–10. Luther even relies on rhetoric of God's glory, which is reminiscent of later Reformed theologians. WA18, 763.

However, some of Luther's remarks suggest a stronger claim, namely, that God has no reasons whatsoever for electing some and not electing others. Luther claims, for instance, that because God is by definition righteous and loving, whatever God does is righteous and loving by necessity. If God decides to save some and damn others, there is no "higher authority or canons of morality" (as Luther puts it) that could be used to challenge God's ultimate decision. When God makes moral decisions, there is no antecedent reason or norm to justify them. The decisions are what they are; they are "brute choosings", which cannot be challenged by any authority. Furthermore, the Creator and the created are in a completely asymmetric position: God can do whatever God wants with us, because He has no obligations towards His creations. So, whatever God does to us is righteous, because He owes us nothing and is not under any obligation towards us.[47]

In our estimation, the two wills response is inadequate. This is because it leaves us with the mystical incompatibility between the revealed God of love and charity, the father of Jesus, and the unknowable majestic God, whose arbitrary decrees are final. On the one hand, God reveals to us in His Word to be of love and good will, wanting the salvation of everyone. On the other hand, the inscrutable will of the unknown God looks to be completely arbitrary: if He so wanted, God could change the will and heart of every person so that they would turn towards him and He could save them.[48] God does not do that, however. This puts pressure on the idea that God indeed has charity and good will towards all humans. Given the distinction between revealed will and the secret will, it becomes increasingly difficult to know what God's perfect love and charity look like. This easily leads to a view where there is no analogy between our everyday language and how that language applies to God. If God's love looks like hate, indifference or tyranny, it makes no sense to call it love anymore.

Here, the debate between Erasmus and Luther has interesting parallels with contemporary debates. Reformed theologians and philosophers often reject claim (1) and maintain that God is perfectly loving but does not will the salvation of all.[49] God's perfect love is compatible with making the damnation of some individuals necessary and unavoidable. Against this, many follow Erasmus and affirm an incompatibilist account of free will and a non-deterministic account of grace. According to these views, God is unable to decree, determine or necessitate how humans respond to His call of salvation. Because humans have free will and incompatibilism is true, there might always be individuals who resist God. The damned are not damned because God wants it, but simply because they do not want to be saved and God cannot change their wills without overriding their freedom. Here, eternal damnation would ultimately be justified by invoking another great good: the existence of free and autonomous beings who can make morally significant choices and engage in deep relationships of love and charity. Because God wants to create such immensely valuable

[47] WA18, 633, 15–19.
[48] WA18, 707, 32–36.
[49] See, e.g., BIGNON, *Excusing Sinners*.

beings, He takes the risk of some humans turning against him.[50] Finally, some contemporary theologians and philosophers reject (3) and hold that God will eventually save everyone.[51]

Conclusion

To conclude our article, we want to highlight some features that arise out of our analysis. The first point pertains to the actual issue of disagreement between Luther and Erasmus. At first glance, it might look like Erasmus and Luther actually disagreed drastically on a wide variety of issues. What we want to suggest is that when the rhetorical bravado is swept aside, we see significant agreement on many topics and slight differences on one or two issues. These two Augustinian theologians were committed to most Augustinian doctrines, broadly speaking, of God's sovereignty, grace, sin and justification. Their crucial disagreement was about the appropriate balance between APC and RP. Both Luther and Erasmus held onto human moral responsibility in the eyes of God, on the one hand, and God's grace as an unmerited gift, on the other. The collision between these two principles is perhaps one of the core problems of the whole Christian dogmatic system. APC implies that humans can do nothing that merits positive treatment from God's side. This raises the question about the grounds of RP. If there is no free will, how can RP be justified? Erasmus argues that RP cannot be justifiably held without human free will, because otherwise God would be an unjust tyrant. Against this, Luther maintains that APC is incompatible with human free will and RP can be maintained on other grounds.

The debate is ultimately about how the tension between these two principles is to be resolved and the role of free will within it. Erasmus is convinced that free will is required for RP, so he attacks Luther for diminishing and destroying human moral responsibility and merit, which are crucial for moral, social and Christian life. Without free will, there is no RP; there is no praise or blame, no commandments or exhortations, and no punishments or rewards. For him, RP is a given, which in turn entails the reality of free will. As we suggested earlier, Erasmus' weakness is that he is unable to spell out how free will and RP work together with APC.

This is the point where Luther mercilessly attacks Erasmus: if human salvation were in some sense up to us, as Erasmus holds, it would be possible, in principle, for salvation to be completely up to us. But this cannot be, Luther deduces, because APC is to be true. Thus, our salvation cannot in any sense be up to us. In other words, Luther takes APC as a wedge and drives it between free will and RP. Ultimately, the weakness in Luther's view is his case for RP without free will. Luther is extremely sketchy here and we must conclude that he fails, or at least his defence of RP without free will is severely incomplete. Therefore, it remains difficult to see how Luther's uncompromising divine determinism and deterministic account of grace could be reconciled with RP and God's perfect love and charity.

Developing Luther's views further with contemporary tools could yield interesting results. One interpretation would be that Luther is attempting to formulate a theologically motivated theory of moral responsibility without invoking basic desert. In this sense, he parts ways from

[50] See, e.g., Jerry WALLS, *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory: A Protestant View of Cosmic Drama* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015).

[51] See, e.g., John KRONEN and Eric REITAN, *God's Final Victory: A Comparative Philosophical Case for Universalism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011).

both contemporary compatibilists and libertarians who retain a notion of free will and seek to justify basic desert moral responsibility. Perhaps what we are seeing in Luther is a genuinely novel theological theory of moral responsibility, which would today be taken as a form of *hard incompatibilism*. Hard incompatibilists reject free will and basic desert moral responsibility. However, they seek to retain some moral responsibility attitudes and practices because of their practical usefulness.[52] Further research is needed to identify the exact overlaps between contemporary free will sceptics and Luther.

Another way to develop Luther's views on moral responsibility in the contemporary context would be somewhat less radical. Luther thinks that humans can be held responsible for actions that flow out of their nature even while they have no control over that nature at all. In contemporary terms, an action is *attributed* to an agent if that action expresses the agent's "deep self" or "real self", or is brought about by the agent's goals, intentions and attitudes. There are theories of moral responsibility in contemporary literature that ground responsibility in this kind of attribution of actions alone. For these views, it does not matter whether the agent is in control of her character or how that character was formed in the first place. An agent is responsible for those actions that flow out of her current character. Such theories could perhaps be used to formulate a theory of moral responsibility that would fit in with Luther's aims. Jesse Couenhoven, for instance, has developed an Augustinian theory of moral responsibility by making use of such contemporary resources.[53] It seems to us that this would be one promising avenue for Lutherans to take.

[52] For a development of theistic hard incompatibilism, see Derk PEREBOOM, Libertarianism and Theological Determinism, in Kevin TIMPE, Daniel SPEAK (ed.), Free Will and Theism (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 112–131.

[53] Jesse COUENHOVEN, *Stricken by Sin, Cured by Christ: Agency, Necessity, and Culpability in Augustinian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).